

Brock BaseCamp—Outdoor Orientation Programs Come to Canada

By Tim O'Connell

What exactly is an “outdoor orientation program?” First offered in the United States in the 1930s by Dartmouth College, outdoor orientation programs (OOPs) use adventure programming to help incoming students adjust to university or college (Association for Experiential Education, 2011). Typically, these programs are conducted in a wilderness or backcountry setting, are several days long and include activities such as backpacking, canoeing or mountain biking. The settings and activities provide the “unfamiliar environment” where coping skills and learning behaviours can be developed; these are then transferred to students’ experiences when they enter university or college. OOPs most often target “traditional” first-year university students, or those that graduate from high school and move immediately into university.

Brock BaseCamp was founded in 2010 by Dr. Tim O'Connell, Associate Professor of Recreation and Leisure Studies; Mr. Ryan Howard, a PhD student in Applied Health Sciences; and Dr. Anna Lathrop, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at Brock University. BaseCamp ran one inaugural trip last summer, a canoe trip to Algonquin. The goals of Brock BaseCamp are to provide incoming students with the opportunity to make friends and create community; ask questions about what it takes to be successful at university; talk about student life issues such as living away from home, diversity, making healthy choices, and drug and alcohol use; and develop an appreciation for outdoor recreation and the natural environment.

The founders believe that Brock BaseCamp is the first true outdoor orientation program in Canada!

What does a BaseCamp trip look like? All trips are led by current Brock students (3rd year, 4th year and graduate students) who

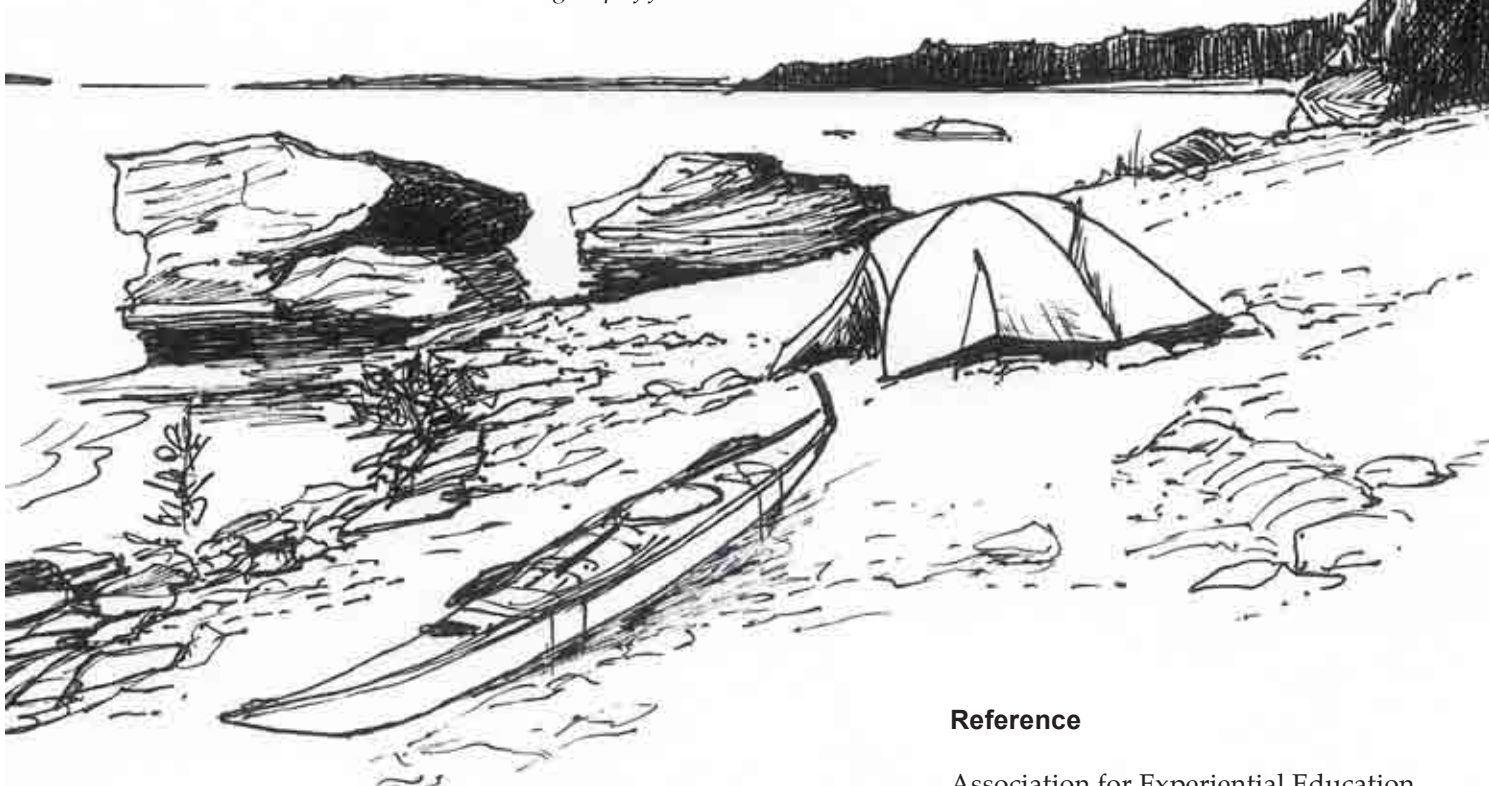
provide student-to-student peer mentorship and can share their stories and advice. A formal curriculum helps guide evening discussions around the campfire and serves as a springboard for talking about other aspects of student life. The leaders are generally students taking the Outdoor Recreation concentration in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Brock. Plans are underway to develop an outdoor leadership course for non-majors to provide the opportunity to recruit student leaders from other programs of study. Ryan Howard, BaseCamp Coordinator and PhD student in Applied Health Sciences, commented:

We are in a unique position to offer an orientation program that is tailored to engage our incoming students in an innovative and experiential curriculum, all the while travelling through some of Ontario's most inspiring outdoor settings. Having our upper year students to facilitate these experiences adds a dimension of peer mentorship and insight to our curriculum that we have found to be a really important part of our program. By utilizing the power of peer mentorship in a safe and open environment, we are able to effectively tackle topics such as time management, study skills, the importance of work/life/balance, making healthy choices, being away from home, and where to buy the best pizza!

Does BaseCamp work? Both qualitative and quantitative data collected by the BaseCamp team indicate that students feel a strong sense of community with their group, have improved time management skills, have developed an affinity for Brock University and have an enhanced ability to take active initiative. Followup focus group discussions and surveys indicated students continued to feel this way four months after the trip, which was close to the end of their first semester at university. Tyler, a Sports Management major, remarked,

Our first night was a cozy campsite with a gorgeous view. We got to know each other and had our first fire together. The next four days would end up to be some of the best days of the summer. We laughed way too much, shared stories, and got over the awkward "I don't know anyone" phase. We helped each other with portages and became a close group of friends almost

rock-climbing trips. Incoming students can register for a non-credit course that indicates they participated in Brock BaseCamp on their academic transcript. For more information about BaseCamp, please visit www.brocku.ca/basecamp.



instantly when we had to rely on each other to complete a seemingly impossible task. If you are reading this and thinking all this group did was laugh and canoe you are partially right, but we also discovered how to successfully transition from the sitcom that is high school to university life. This was incredibly beneficial for me and I think all students that come to Brock should participate in BaseCamp. It is by far the best way to help you transition to university life. Even if you are not a fan of canoeing you will still enjoy the trip and wonder how you could have possibly done without it. Brock BaseCamp is a success and I hope it helps students transition to university for many years to come.

Reference

Association for Experiential Education (2011). *Wilderness orientation programs*. Retrieved April 17, 2011 from www.aee.org/whitepapers

Tim O'Connell, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Brock University. Prior to his life in academia, Tim was a full-time wilderness guide and worked for organizations such as the Cradlerock Outdoor Network, SUNY Cortland, Friends Seminary and Wilderness Inquiry. He is an avid rock and ice climber, mountain biker, sea kayaker and canoeist, and enjoys both Nordic and alpine skiing. Tim's research interests include the development of sense of community and sense of place in outdoor recreation settings, and the pedagogy of reflective journaling. He lives in Ridgeville, Ontario, with his dog Ridge.